

Preface

Since 1823, when Major Stephen H. Long was sent to explore the Mississippi headwaters, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been the steward of the upper Mississippi and, consequently, at the center of a complex history of water management. The policies of the Corps have usually been influenced by economic interests, urban coalitions, and sportsmen's groups—all of which have attempted to use and sometimes abuse the Mississippi over the past 110 years. What follows attempts to trace the major environmental events in Corps management policies since the Civil War.

This account of Corps activity on the upper Mississippi River is divided chronologically into three sections. Part One is entitled "The Age of Enterprise" because Corps policy often favored economic and political factions at the expense of the general public. The "gilded age" of late 19th-century American life was a period of exploitation, conspicuous consumption, and few government regulations. Corps initiatives reflected a national concern with commercial growth and development rather than support for the preservation and protection of the environment. Progress signified the taming of the natural environment. Progress meant that Indians, homesteaders, and small businessmen must recognize the laws of free enterprise and unregulated competition. Control over water resources belonged to the individuals and corporations with the best "connections" and the "biggest stick."

Part Two concerns the changes in the upper Mississippi region in the 20th century. From the start of the six-foot channel project at the turn of the century, to the debates over the twelve-foot channel in the 1960s, civil works projects dominated the period. The role of the Corps changed from that of an adjunct of private enterprise to custodian of locks, dams, reservoirs, floodways, and other construction projects. During this era, environmental organizations emerged as special interest groups. They first voiced their concerns when in 1930s Congress asked the Corps to build and operate one of the largest public works projects in the history of our country: 26 locks and dams to make the upper Mississippi River into a controlled canal. Although this early attempt at comprehensive water resource planning produced a successful commercial system, the very success of the project caused as many problems as it solved. The Mississippi River cannot be modified without considering its vast watershed. This fact became evident after World War II, when numerous floods caused problems for many urban communities. For another quarter century the Corps' solution to this problem was to build more public works to control

flooding and to assist in waste water disposal and fresh water supply. During the 1960s many interest groups evaluated the larger issue of the role of technology in national and international affairs. The "public works" tradition of the Corps was also challenged. The environmentalists' position was heard. These factors brought about a change in Corps policy, which is reflected in Part Three, "A New Beginning."

Many individuals assisted in this study. John T. Greenwood, Leland R. Johnson, and Martin Reuss of the Historical Division of the Office of the Chief of Engineers initiated the project, made helpful suggestions during the research, and reviewed the final copy. Polly Athan researched much of the material and wrote the first draft. Discussions with Patrick Brunet provided many insights into the environmental issues of the 1930s. Organizing, researching, and writing this historical sketch have been a pleasure. The Chief Historian's position in the Office of the Chief of Engineers provides the scholar with complete freedom to choose topics, arrange the materials, and interpret the data. The office is more interested in historical integrity than in favorable public relations. The environmental issues of the past two decades have underscored the need for professional objectivity in evaluating the work of the Corps on the nation's watersheds.

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